

Book Review

McQuire, Scott, and Wei Sun, eds. *Communicative Cities and Urban Space*. London & New York: Routledge, 2022, 258 pp., ISBN 9780367516482.

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The integration of digital media and network communication infrastructure has not only altered the traditional physical landscape of cities but also transformed how urban residents communicate. Furthermore, it has reshaped the dynamics of migration, diffusion, and assimilation of diverse cultural elements within global society.

On the one hand, cities serve as communication hubs and relationship networks, facilitating the exchange of space, time, actions, and individuals in social progress, thus naturally becoming essential conduits for transculture communication (Zhang and Xiao 2022). However, with the widespread dissemination of digital media and internet infrastructure, the conventional ways of communication in cities have undergone a profound transformation. Face-to-face interactions are increasingly imbricated with these new forms of mediation and mediatization. Thus, the new features of transcultural communication in the emerging “mediated urban space” or “communicative city” deserve our attention. On the other hand, media theory has always intersected with the multidimensional discourse of science, technology, and art, encompassing urban settings and the built environment. This inherently steers the trajectory of media research towards a trans-contextual, trans-disciplinary, and trans-media approach. Digital media not only alters the ways in which previous constraints of site and setting play out, but also produces fundamental changes in the conditions under which any kind of “archive” might be assembled, accessed, and analyzed (p. 1). Therefore, in this era characterized by the symbiotic relationship between “city as a medium” and “medium as a city,” it becomes essential to surpass the binary distinction between the two entities and comprehend the transcultural communication among the fundamental elements of urban life.

In this regard, the book *Communicative Cities and Urban Space* is a profound exploration of the intersections between digital media, urban space, and transcultural communication. This anthology comprises contributions from scholars at

the Center for Information and Communication Studies at Fudan University and international researchers.

This book is structured into four thematic parts: “Rethinking mediated urban space as communicative space,” “Places, communication and placemaking,” “Urban screens and new forms of public participation,” and “Urban infrastructure and the communicative city” encompassing 15 research contributions.

1 Content Overview

The first part *Rethinking mediated urban space as communicative space* delves into the theoretical foundations of the “communicative city.” Drucker and Gumpert (2008), who introduced the concept in 2008, seek to define the communicative city as dependent upon who is doing the searching, when, and their current technological bias that pervades the quest (p. 11). The concept of a communicative city extends beyond mere communication infrastructure to encompass vibrant communities. As urbanization progresses, the communities and interpersonal bonds become more intricate. They argued that one potential way to enhance city communication environments involves creating a “communication index” to assess and prioritize cities’ communication assets, ultimately promoting better connectivity within urban spaces.

Scott McQuire emphasizes the evolving role of architecture as a mode of urban communication (p. 28). Traditionally, architecture and urban planning conveyed specific values through symbolism and spatial organization. However, as digital media have become ubiquitous, location-aware, and capable of supporting real-time feedback, there has been a paradigm shift from traditional media to what has been termed *geomedia* (McQuire 2016). The prevalence of digital screens and electronic signs has greatly enhanced the communicative potential of urban spaces. Consequently, the role of architecture in communication has evolved to become more multifaceted, influential, and rich in meaning. At a time when urban life is undergoing significant changes, the way we act, interact, consume, and remember, and in turn how we are monitored, categorized, and transformed into data, becomes a pressing issue.

This context sets up the importance of establishing a spatial articulation of symbolic and material presence in urban spaces. Through a spatial observation of images and signals overlaying cities, material artifacts built into or carried around urban sites, and conceptions mobilized in their construction and appropriation, Zlatan Krajina (2022) introduces the concept of “multispace.” Communication always involves crossing space and establishing spatial relations, whether through tangible or imagined extensions, all of which contribute to human understanding of the

city. Thus, the city emerged as a collage of spaces: physical, represented, imagined, embodied, and everything in between. This part covers a diverse spectrum of viewpoints on how digital technologies have shaped the spatial dynamics of contemporary cities. It combines online and offline approaches, describing the correlation between research in urban geography and media technologies.

The Part 2 *Places, communication and placemaking* underscores the significance of digital media in contemporary placemaking practices. Wei Sun discusses the role of the human body in urban experiences mediated by new media practices. The new spatialization of media in cities has created the possibility of merging long-distance discursive communication in virtual space with physically present interaction in physical space. Previously separated forms of speaking publicness and visual publicness appear to merge, especially in the context of Shanghai's citywalk projects. Hence, she characterizes the public realm of the mobile network era as "embodied publicness," (p. 63) which includes pluralism and diversity, the multiplicity of communication scenes, the interweaving and interpenetration of multiple participation modes of negotiation and performance, and so on.

Digital media technologies and practices are increasingly intertwined with public spaces. Nansen and Apperley delve into the digitization of children's public playgrounds within the broader context of the communicative city (p. 76). The distinctions between digital and non-digital realms are becoming blurred as a result of mobile, locative, and ambient urban media. It is crucial to figure the implications of datafication in children's public spaces and the encroachment of commercial activities into public areas through digital infrastructure or apps. Certainly, the involvement of municipal planning authorities is crucial in this process. Chen Lin and Lu Jieqing, using the Suzhou Industrial Park as an example, explain that the evolution of urban public spaces, such as public art installations, is mainly driven by modern urban development needs and economic requirements (p. 93). Outdoor artworks are subject to diverse experiences, interpretations, and attributions of meaning by the public. This contributes to distinct urban identities and collective urban imagination.

In her examination of public art, Christiane Brosius' introduced the concept of the "communicative city" within the frame of "transculturality." The Indian government has promoted the so-called "Shanghai model", or even "nationalist myth" since 2008, presenting it as a successful strategy for linear urban development driven by statistics. However, by observing Mumbai's enforced adoption of the same digital urbanization process as Shanghai, Brosius noticed how digitalization has become a challenging issue on a global scale. It highlights how global concepts can sometimes act as constraints, disregarding the varied local responses to them. She put it this way:

The rapid urban and economic changes that we witness in contemporary Asia must be studied in their historical, transgressive, and relational nature. Distributed across places, such changes surface in transregional migration flows, urban as well as peri-urban and rural transformation, changing political systems, work patterns and social relations, and responses to environmental hazards (p. 109).

Evidently, Brosius challenges the prevailing narrative of rapid and linear development in “global cities” and the forms of knowledge they produce. While the digital transformation of cities holds promise, with various digital technologies and data-driven approaches being integrated into diverse facets of urban existence such as infrastructure, services, governance, and communication, Brosius suggests that a critical examination of the nexus between cultural diversity and conservation is imperative.

A “communicative city” embodies the potential for knowledge production that counters the homogenizing and monolingual discourse of the “smart city” and other standardized models. It enables a multitude of cities to express themselves uniquely and facilitates greater participation from diverse groups. Examining the global proliferation of digital cities or “communicative cities” through the lens of transcultural communication reveals the presence of contextual disparities in global communication. These disparities are influenced by various factors, including historical legacies, socio-economic circumstances, political ideologies, religious convictions, and linguistic diversity. Effectively addressing inequalities in transcultural communication in urban areas, demands a nuanced comprehension of the power dynamics and structural impediments that shape communication interactions within and across cities.

The third part *Urban screens and new forms of public participation*, is written by Stephanie Hannon, Danielle Wyatt, Nikos Papastergiadis, Millicent Weber, and Audrey Yue, focusing on the communicative potential of a unique feature of the modern media city: large video screens in urban public spaces.

Hannon’s research in Dandenong provides empirical insights into the functionalities and constraints of urban screens as communication platforms (p. 131). In contrast, Wyatt, Papastergiadis, and Weber discuss Federation Square in Melbourne’s center, emphasizing the importance of participating in public spaces (p. 147). In their opinions, the experience of media-augmented public space is regarded as an “assemblage,” shaped by interactions among place, people, institutions and technology. Consequently, the concept of “ambience” becomes a valuable analytical tool to explore the qualities of cultural participation in the outdoor public spaces of contemporary cultural precincts. Yue further explores critical placemaking as an inherently networked process produced by socio-spatial and technologically mediated relationships that connect people through a common place-frame (p. 163).

In communicative cities, the shift from verbal communication to visual expression signifies not only a change in cultural paradigms but also a reconfiguration of social ideologies. Whether manifested through physical placement, curated artistic and cultural content, or networking capabilities, urban screens serve as focal points for fostering local culture, community cohesion, and civic identity.

As the public screen transforms the exterior walls of buildings into a new geographical media arena, the interaction between digital screens and public spaces becomes more prominent in urban communication. Audiences gather around these appealing screens, participating in communication and discussions about the displayed content with unfamiliar individuals. This interaction fosters conditions conducive to the formation of “public space,” echoing the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Habermas. In this way, it gives legitimacy to all forms of discourses, including official and subjugated knowledges, and shares in the practice of “world-making” that literally connects people, communities, clusters, continents, and so on (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995, p. 191). Within the visual fabric of the city, only through genuine integration and harmonization of cultures from diverse groups, classes, and backgrounds, can we attain “harmony but not uniformity.”

The final part, entitled *Urban infrastructure and the communicative city*, examines how digital media platforms shape the contemporary communicative city. Begins by regarding public transportation as a form of urban media, Zhang Yuchen analyzes the cultural politics at play in the construction of Shanghai’s metro system (p. 179).

The concepts of transportation and communication have a long-term correlation. During the era characterized by the extensive expansion of roads, rivers, and railways, “communication” was largely intertwined with the physical movement of people and goods. In the twentieth century, with the continuous advancement of various information transmission tools and mechanisms for maintaining social connections, the term “communication” has also been expanded to include media, such as news and broadcasting (Guo and Wang 2021). As a form of public transportation, the tram introduces a new experience of “collective mobility,” fostering fresh avenues for daily urban interaction and lifestyle. It contributes to the standardization of modern urban life, both in material infrastructure and spiritual engagement. Through tram rides, the ethos of urban “circulation civilization” can be popularized on a daily basis.

The use of media technologies has the power to change how the state, society, and individuals interact through digital connections. This facilitates the revitalization and restructuring of elements within urban community cooperation, unleashing an inherent potential for enabling multi-subject collaborative governance within the city. From this perspective, Zhou Haiyan (2022) considers the implications of drone photography for urban communication. In the creative

deployment of drones, the traditional relationship between the city and the media is reversed. Cities do not precede the media; instead, technological media generate cities. The traditional model of “dependence upon central sites” has been disrupted in the digital era, resulting in the bolstering of the dynamic construction of multi-center networks.

Furthermore, Pan Ji (2022) demonstrates how government agencies integrate social media technologies, using the “Shanghai Fabu” WeChat account as an example. According to Pan, the integration of WeChat into the government system may introduce potential disturbances to the political landscape. Through its investment and curation of these media practices, Fabu is able to align heterogeneous temporalities and reset the order of government communication. In short, WeChat enables a city government to integrate itself into a digital platform for public communication.

Last but not least, to better understand the close relationship between the “communicative city” and “transcultural communication,” Lambert and Pfefferkorn’s research on international students in Melbourne provides new insights into the relationship between the communicative city and transcultural communication (p. 191). For newcomers, the right to the “communicative city” is mostly a partial right, a right to consume and indulge in cultural cosmopolitanism. It points out that, as previously mentioned, a genuine “communicative city” must consistently consider the communicative intentions and mentalities of different individuals, fostering an urban environment conducive to cross-cultural communication. Without such attention, these cities may exacerbate feelings of isolation or foster potentially hazardous political alliances, instead of enhancing communication.

2 Conclusion

Overall, *Communicative Cities and Urban Space* effectively bridges the gap between digital media evolution and urban space transformation. The book’s combination of various forces and actors, including urban materiality (its design logics and aesthetics, its history and politics, its forms of institutionalization and governance) and media technologies (hardware, interfaces, software, and network architectures) (p. 7). These factors can only be elucidated through interaction with other domains. In certain extreme cases, the emergence of market monopolies and social stratification, propelled by media technology, exposes a restructuring of power dynamics within urban spaces. This prompts a critical reassessment of how the concept of the “media city” or “communicative city” becomes a new space for the aggregation and circulation of power. The development of the media infrastructure network inherently involves meeting the diverse needs of various stakeholders, such as tech companies, municipal authorities, consumers, tourists, residents, and others. From this, there is

no doubt that the concept of the “communicative city” offers a valuable framework for reconsidering urban life in the twenty-first century.

By integrating a communicative perspective, the book derives implications for transcultural communication: (1) within cities. Digital media have transformed the nature of public space, allowing specific cultures to express themselves through mediums like screens. This contextual shift has altered the interactive urban landscape and civic participation. In this case, the concept of the “other” in communication no longer pertains solely to face-to-face encounters but extends to generalized others. It is necessary to truly integrate all groups into urban communication with the perspective of transcultural communication; (2) between cities. Digital media fosters the intricate blend and mutual influence of “global localization” and “local globalization,” presenting both opportunities and challenges for the exchange of diverse cultures. It is imperative to revisit the fundamental principles of transcultural communication and explore strategies to preserve local subjectivity amidst the surge of intensified communication; and (3) beyond cities. Every medium is an information system. “Under the influence of modern media, the degree of cultural expansion and communication is deepening, so culture is no longer suitable to be materialized and geographically confined” (Huang 2022). In shaping the future of transcultural communication, there is a need to cultivate a vision of transmedia communication. This involves bridging the divide between architecture, media, symbols, people, and technology, exploring the interactions among the transboundary and integration of all formative forces within the ecosystem of a “communicative city.”

In conclusion, while the concepts of “media city,” “communicative city,” or “geomedia,” “digiplace” and similar terms remain popular, scholars are highly intrigued by the interplay between physical environments and digital media technologies. Therefore, this book offers significant insights and an evaluable framework of for reconsidering urban life in the digital age. Although 15 qualitative and quantitative studies all focus on the main theme, this limitation might be unavoidable given the nature of a collected volume of papers.

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